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<i>President:</i>	Mr. Burian	(Slovakia)
<i>Members:</i>	Belgium	Mr. Belle
	China	Mr. Li Kexin
	Congo	Mr. Biabaroh-Iboro
	France	Mr. Pouille
	Ghana	Mr. Christian
	Indonesia	Mr. Kleib
	Italy	Mr. Mantovani
	Panama	Mr. Suescum
	Peru	Mr. Pereyra
	Qatar	Mr. Al-Nasser
	Russian Federation	Mr. Dolgov
	South Africa	Mr. Laher
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Williams
	United States of America	Mr. Ang

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting was resumed at 3.05 p.m.

The President: I wish to remind all speakers to limit their statements to no more than five minutes in order to enable the Council to carry out its work expeditiously.

I now give the floor to the representative of Cuba.

Mrs. Núñez Mordoché (Cuba) (*spoke in Spanish*): It is my honour to speak on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement. The Non-Aligned Movement has reaffirmed on many occasions its clear position on the situation in the Middle East. The Movement is deeply concerned at the increasing deterioration in the situation on the ground and the impasse facing the peace process in the region. The Non-Aligned Movement has reiterated its deep concern at the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory during the most recent period, particularly as the result of the disproportionate, indiscriminate and excessive use of force by Israel, which has caused a large death toll and injuries to Palestinian civilians as well as huge material destruction.

It is clear that the question of Palestine is at the core of the problem in the Middle East. As long as this situation remains unsolved, pockets of tension in the region will continue to proliferate.

There can be no just and lasting solution to the question of Palestine that is not based on the principle of land for peace, which includes the establishment of an independent Palestinian State in all the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital, living in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbours. Israel must immediately stop its aggression against the Palestinian civilian population and withdraw its troops from the Gaza Strip to the positions it occupied before June 2006.

Israel must put an end to its occupation of and illegal practices in the occupied Palestinian territory, including the illegal construction of the separation wall, which is aimed at seizing and annexing Palestinian land and property and modifying the demographic and geographic character of the Palestinian territory.

The Non-Aligned Movement reaffirms its support for Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian National Authority and Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, in

his rejection of a so-called Palestinian State with provisional borders. Such a so-called provisional State would, in essence, be no more than an entity under the domain and control of Israel as the occupying Power, rather than a sovereign and independent State.

The Movement rejects any attempt to alter the terms of reference of the peace process and further rejects the imposition of unilateral measures aimed at the imposition by Israel of an unlawful and unilateral solution. The Non-Aligned Movement stresses the need for the resumption of direct and substantive negotiations between the parties so as to achieve a comprehensive, just, lasting and peaceful settlement to the question of Palestine, on the basis of the relevant United Nations resolutions and in accordance with the norms and principles of international law enshrined therein.

The Non-Aligned Movement expresses its strong condemnation of Israel's heinous act of aggression against the blessed Al-Aqsa mosque and the holy city of Al-Quds al-Sharif — the demolishing of a historical road connecting Bab Al-Maghriba with the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound, in addition to two rooms adjacent to Al-Buraq wall. The Non-Aligned Movement also condemns Israel's continued excavation work beneath the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound, undermining its foundations and threatening it with collapse. The Non-Aligned Movement considers those acts and measures taken by Israel, the occupying Power, as a provocation to the feelings and sentiments of the more than one billion Muslims in the world. The Movement denounces Israel's continued policy of denying Palestinian worshippers access to their religious sites.

In the context of the grave situation that the Middle East faces at present, the Non-Aligned Movement reaffirms the permanent responsibility of the United Nations, including the Security Council, with regard to the situation in the region.

It is no secret that Israel's unpunished acts are to a large extent the result of the protection provided it by the United States Government in the Security Council and in other international forums. The United States has shackled the Security Council through the use of 31 vetoes relating to draft resolutions on the question of Palestine and through countless threats to resort to this undemocratic and obsolete privilege.

The impasse facing the peace process does not benefit anyone, not even the Israeli people, who also suffer the consequences of their Government's policies. Actions such as the brutal military aggression against Lebanon and Israel's presence in the occupied Syrian Golan are likewise unacceptable.

The Government of Lebanon has continuously endeavoured to stabilize the situation in its territory following Israel's relentless aggression and serious violations of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon. The Non-Aligned Movement welcomes the steps taken by the Lebanese Government to implement resolution 1701 (2006), particularly through the deployment of the armed forces in the region south of the Litani River and along the Blue Line. The Non-Aligned Movement also welcomes the deployment of Lebanese armed forces along the northern and eastern borders of Lebanon with a view to ensuring the security and stability of the borders.

The Movement remains deeply concerned at the ongoing air and land violations by Israel of the Blue Line, in breach of resolution 1701 (2006), and strongly calls on Israel to end its occupation of the northern part of Al-Ghajar, a town on the northern side of the Blue Line, and to refrain, starting immediately, from any violation of Lebanese sovereignty and of resolution 1701 (2006), as well as from any act of provocation vis-à-vis the Lebanese armed forces or the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon.

The Non-Aligned Movement calls for a prompt settlement of the Sheba'a farms issue, with full respect for Lebanese sovereignty and territorial integrity, as stipulated in resolution 1701 (2006). In that regard, the Movement takes note of the important proposal made by the Lebanese Government in its seven-point plan regarding the Sheba'a farms and calls on all parties to cooperate to protect Lebanon's sovereign rights in that area, and notes the important endeavours of the Secretary-General in that regard.

The Movement is acutely aware of the enormous challenges facing Lebanon as a result of the 1.2 million cluster bomblets launched by Israel during its aggression against Lebanon last summer. While condemning the use of such weaponry by Israel and deploring the death toll resulting from them, the Movement strongly urges Israel to provide the exact locations of use of those deadly weapons, as well as

maps of the mines planted by Israel during its occupation of southern Lebanon.

The Non-Aligned Movement urges the Security Council to decide on the entry into force, with no further delay, of a comprehensive and lasting ceasefire in Lebanon. The Non-Aligned Movement welcomes the generous contributions and pledges made during the Rafik Hariri Paris III conference, held in Paris on 25 January 2007.

The Non-Aligned Movement reaffirms that all measures and actions already taken, or that will taken in future, by Israel, the occupying Power, such as its illegal decision of 14 December 1981, which purports to modify the legal, physical and demographic conditions and institutional structure of the occupied Syrian Golan, as well as the measures taken by Israel to implement its jurisdiction and administration there, are null and void and have no legal effect.

We reaffirm also that all those measures and actions, including the illegal construction and expansion of Israeli settlements in the Syrian Golan since 1967, are a clear violation of international law, international agreements, the Charter of the United Nations and the relevant decisions of the Organization, including resolution 497 (1981) and the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of 12 August 1949, as well as a challenge to the international community.

The Movement demands that Israel abide by resolution 497 (1981) and withdraw completely from the occupied Syrian Golan to the borders of 4 June 1967.

The Non-Aligned Movement will continue to support and contribute in every way possible to efforts to achieve a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East, based on all relevant United Nations resolutions, including resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 425 (1978), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003), the terms of reference of the Madrid Conference, the principle of land for peace, the Arab Peace Initiative adopted by the summit meeting of the League of Arab States held in March 2002 at Beirut, and the Road Map.

The President: The next speaker is the representative of Azerbaijan, to whom I give the floor.

Mr. Mehdiyev (Azerbaijan): In my capacity as Chairman of the Organization of the Islamic

Conference (OIC) Group at the United Nations, I have been authorized to read out a statement issued by the OIC Group on 8 February 2007.

"The OIC Group at the United Nations in New York met on 8 February 2007, at the ambassadorial level, to consider the grave situation in occupied East Jerusalem as a result of Israeli aggression against the holy city and the blessed Al-Aqsa mosque, and issued the following statement.

"The OIC Group at the United Nations in New York expresses its strong condemnation of Israel's heinous aggression against the blessed Al-Aqsa mosque and the holy city of Al-Quds Al-Sharif, committed by demolishing a historic road connecting Bab Al-Maghariba with the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound, in addition to two rooms adjacent to Al-Buraq wall. The OIC Group also condemns Israel's continued excavation works beneath the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound, undermining its foundations and threatening it with collapse. The OIC Group considers these acts and measures taken by Israel, the occupying Power, a provocation to the feelings and sentiments of more than one billion Muslims in the world. The OIC Group denounces Israel's continued policy in denying Palestinian worshippers access to their religious sites.

"The OIC Group stresses that these provocative Israeli actions are not the first of their kind. Since 1968, the Security Council has adopted 16 resolutions, particularly resolution 465 (1980), and has repeatedly declared that measures and arrangements taken by Israel, the occupying Power, which aim at changing the legal status, demographic composition and character of the city of Al-Quds al-Sharif are null and void and without any legal validity whatsoever. Furthermore, the Security Council has repeatedly reaffirmed the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 to all the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, including East Jerusalem.

"The OIC Group stresses that Israel, the occupying Power, by escalating its aggression against Al-Quds Al-Sharif and creating new facts on the ground, raises doubts about its seriousness to resume the peace process which aims at achieving a just settlement of the Palestinian

question — seriously threatens all efforts exerted to revive the political process and aborts any possibility for negotiations on the final status issues, particularly the issue of Al-Quds Al-Sharif.

"The OIC Group, reaffirming the centrality of the cause of Al-Quds Al-Sharif for the whole Islamic umma, affirms the firm position of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, for which the cause of Palestine and Al-Quds Al-Sharif was the *raison d'être*, on the preservation of the Arab and holy characters of the city of Al-Quds Al-Sharif.

"The OIC Group, emphasizing the need to prevent a further escalation in the situation in the region, calls upon the Security Council, as the body responsible for maintaining international peace and security, to take immediate and urgent action in order to bring an end to Israeli intransigence and violations against the blessed Al-Aqsa mosque and Al-Quds Al-Sharif, and to guarantee Israel's respect for the Council's resolutions and for international law, particularly international humanitarian law."

The President: I give the floor to the representative of Turkey.

Mr. İlkin (Turkey): As Turkey has aligned itself with the statement delivered by the representative of Germany on behalf of the European Union, I will underline just a few points which we deem to be of critical importance at this juncture in the Middle East.

The events in the region once again depict a grim reality for the international community. The complex webs of issues in the region are certainly more interconnected and entangled than ever. The Middle East peace process continues to be stalled. The recent internal strife in Palestine and Lebanon has further complicated the situation and caused it to deteriorate.

With respect to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, there is an absolute need for the realization of the vision of two States without further delay. We welcome the recent agreement to form a Palestinian national unity government. This is a must. We hope that the new Palestinian government will be established on a political platform that embraces the Quartet principles and meets the expectations of not only the Palestinians, but the international community as well.

In the Middle East peace process, we believe that a constructive approach with a view to initiating the final status negotiations can be within our reach. However, as the two parties consider the steps necessary to build mutual confidence, they should also refrain from actions that might lead to new tensions and crises. In this respect, we reaffirm our stance against terrorism and condemn all acts of terrorism and violence targeting innocent people. At the same time, we urge all parties to consider and implement constructive, rather than divisive, policies. In the case of the most recent incident, it was right that Israel finally halted its construction work around Al-Haram Al-Sharif. Yet we understand that the excavation is unfortunately still continuing. We urge Israel to act with the utmost caution and consideration, and to assume policies which reflect high regard for the religious sensitivities of the Muslims.

The Quartet statement of 2 February, announcing a re-energized approach and a commitment to engage with the parties, has been a step in the right direction. In line with this approach, we believe that regional efforts which support and complement the work of the Quartet would be of great value and importance as well. Turkey is also of the opinion that the Syrian and Lebanese tracks should not be overlooked. In this regard, any comprehensive settlement must take into consideration the relevant United Nations resolutions and the principle of land for peace, as well as the Arab peace plan.

Unfortunately, the Israel-Lebanon war of last summer has set back the efforts of Lebanon to heal and rebuild itself. On the other hand, we think that Lebanon could make a strong leap forward and achieve stability if resolution 1701 (2006) were to be fully implemented. Certainly, in this framework, the normalization of relations between Lebanon and its neighbours would also be vitally important.

We condemn very strongly the two explosions near Beirut today, which led to the loss of lives. We are of the view that the collective energy of the Lebanese should be channelled for the rebuilding of their country. We wish to see the reconciliation of differences through a political dialogue in which common interests in Lebanon become the top priority for each and every Lebanese. Given today's regional and global trends, Turkey believes that the preservation of the unique and exemplary socio-political structure of Lebanon is of paramount importance. Let me underline

once again that Turkey supports the sovereignty, political unity and stability of Lebanon; that support is amply displayed by its contributions to the enhanced United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), as well as to the Maritime Task Force of that Mission. Furthermore, Turkey has opened its seaports and airfields for the use of friendly and ally countries to ease access to Lebanon through UNIFIL. We have also responded to international calls for the recovery and reconstruction of Lebanon, and have pledged a total of \$50 million in the form of donations.

Given its historical and cultural bonds with the brotherly countries of the Middle East, Turkey is determined to continue to contribute to and facilitate the regional and international efforts for the realization of the long-desired peace, security, stability and prosperity in the region.

The President: I give the floor to the representative of Japan.

Mr. Oshima (Japan): I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for having convened this public debate on the Middle East. I also thank Mr. Alvaro de Soto for his comprehensive and — I must add — unfailingly lucid briefing on the often opaque and always complex situation in the Middle East region. The picture of the situation in the Middle East that Mr. De Soto has presented reflects, indeed, a mixture of anxiety and expectation.

First, on Palestine, the international community harbours deep concerns over the unremitting deterioration in the political, security, economic and humanitarian spheres in Palestine, and in particular about the political conflict between Palestinian factions over the past few weeks, which has resulted in many deaths and casualties. While the international community can and should help, it is the Palestinians who bear the primary responsibility to bring unity to their effort to address those problems. We therefore commend the fact that President Abbas and Hamas Political Bureau head Mr. Meshaal agreed, in their recent talks in Saudi Arabia, to form a unity Government in order to end the political difficulties in the Palestinian territories.

That positive step should contribute to the resumption of the peace process. Japan strongly expects that, based on the agreement, the violence will cease and the new unity Government that is to be established will make serious efforts to advance the

peace process with Israel. Japan gives every encouragement to the Palestinians and Israelis in their common effort to find normalcy and peace, and will follow developments closely.

In that regard, we welcome as a positive step the fact that the Government of Israel has taken some measures for the partial transfer of tax and customs revenues to the Palestinian Authority and the easing of restrictions on the movement and access of the Palestinian people following the summit meeting held last December between the Israeli and Palestinian leaders. That being said, we expect Israel to take steps to reduce the number of checkpoints and to transfer further tax and customs revenues. Japan also expects that both the Israeli and Palestinian sides will continue their peace efforts with strong determination, especially regarding the remaining issues, such as the improvement of the dire humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people, the extension of the ceasefire agreement to the West Bank, and the safe return of the abducted Israeli soldier, as well as the release of the Palestinian prisoners.

At the same time, the international community, on its part, particularly countries in the region and the major donors, must undertake and strengthen proactive engagement to support the Palestinians' efforts to advance the peace process. Japan welcomes the recent diplomatic initiatives of the international community to revitalize the peace process, including Saudi Arabia's mediation efforts towards the agreement on the unity Government, the initiative by United States Secretary of State Rice to hold a tripartite meeting among Israel, Palestine and the United States, and the convening of the Quartet meetings. It is hoped that those efforts will lead, through further direct talks between the parties, Palestine and Israel, to a two-State solution reflecting previous international references, including the relevant Security Council resolutions, the road map and the Arab peace initiative.

Of particular importance in that regard, in our view, is the need to give strong, tangible and visible support to President Abbas, who has been exerting the most serious efforts to ensure the interests of all of the Palestinian people. If a new Palestinian unity Government, once established, lives up to the intention to achieve peace and peaceful coexistence with Israel, the international community will undoubtedly respond positively to such a new direction.

For its part, Japan will continue its assistance to the Palestinian people as a major and long-time participant in the international donor community for Palestinians. We will implement projects for strengthening the Office of the President, for humanitarian assistance, including medical care and public health, and for job creation, as part of our support for President Abbas in his endeavours for peace. Japan will also continue working on the concept of a corridor of peace and prosperity, which is a development plan for the Jordan Valley, through regional cooperation involving Israel, Palestine and Jordan. Further action on that initiative will follow.

Let me briefly touch upon the situation in Lebanon. Japan supports the efforts of the Lebanese Government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Siniora, to achieve stability in Lebanon. Japan hopes that the concerned parties and factions in Lebanon will engage proactively in the efforts for stability and reconstruction in the country through dialogue and without resorting to violence.

In that regard, we appreciate the International Conference for Support to Lebanon convened in France last month, which sent a strong message reconfirming the resolve of the international community to continue providing support to Lebanon. At the same time, we strongly condemn the terrorist attack on innocent civilians that took place in Lebanon today, the day before the second anniversary of the attack against former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and 22 others.

There remain many challenges to be addressed, foremost among them the issue between Lebanon and Israel, to ensure the full implementation of resolution 1701 (2006) and the stabilization of the situation in Lebanon. The disarming and disbanding of all remaining militias, as well as the delineation of the border, are among the key issues that must be tackled with vigour. A comprehensive peace that includes both the Lebanese and the Syrian tracks is the only way to achieve permanent peace in the region. From that point of view, Japan expects Syria to play a proactive role for the realization of regional peace and stability.

In conclusion, the Middle East region is fraught with risks and dangers, but at the same time there are encouraging initiatives that require strong support from the international community if we are to avert the further escalation of tension and conflict. Not least among the issues to be tackled are the situation in Iraq,

the Iranian nuclear issue and the situation in Lebanon. Those issues are all affected by and interrelated with one another.

That is why it is so important to ensure that progress is made on the core, central issue in the region — the Middle East peace process, including the Palestinian problems — leading to a positive outcome. We take this opportunity to reaffirm Japan's readiness and determination to continue its proactive, constructive engagement in the region and to extend the maximum assistance possible in order to contribute to the efforts to achieve a just, comprehensive and permanent peace, while working for stability and development in the region as a whole.

The President: I give the floor to the representative of Malaysia.

Mr. Zainuddin (Malaysia): Let me first of all extend my delegation's congratulations to you, Sir, on your accession to the presidency of the Security Council for the month of February. We look forward to an energized Security Council under your presidency as the Council carries out its responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.

We commend the delegation of the Russian Federation on its presidency for the month of January.

My delegation wishes to express its appreciation to you, Sir, for organizing this open debate on an issue which is of the utmost importance. It is our earnest hope that this open debate will be followed up with timely and concrete action by the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, in particular the Palestinian issue. It is our earnest hope also that the Security Council, under your able presidency, will take the necessary just decision to protect the Palestinians, including their inalienable rights, and to act accordingly on the Israeli occupying Power.

My delegation associates itself with the statements made by the representatives of Azerbaijan on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and Cuba on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement.

There is no denying that the Palestinian question, including the Palestine-Israel conflict, remains the most important issue in the Middle East. Not only does it remain the single most important reason for and catalyst for conflict, strife and terrorism in that region; it is also becoming the justification for the violence

related to international terrorism that we continue to see throughout the world. We strongly believe that a solution to that problem would be a major step for the international community in our shared desire for international peace and security.

Sadly, while we all share that concern and hope for a peaceful world, we failed miserably for years on end to find durable and lasting peace in the region. The situation in the Middle East continues to remain volatile. The lack of political commitment and will, particularly on the part of the major players, is telling and well manifested through the incapability of the Security Council to come up with relevant resolutions. In the meantime, Israel continues with its belligerent acts against the Palestinians, disregarding international law, conventions and United Nations resolutions and ignoring calls by the international community to stop its atrocities against the Palestinians. Israel continues to use violence against the Palestinian civilian population, destroy civilian infrastructure and strangle the economic livelihood of Palestinians. Israel also continues to build the illegal separation wall on occupied Palestinian territory, despite the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice and international condemnation. Illegal Israeli settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory continue to be supported and encouraged by the Israeli Government, in total disregard of international laws and norms and its obligations as the occupying Power.

Most recently, Israel came up with yet another belligerent action that smacked of sheer arrogance and insensitivity towards the feelings not only of the people in the region but also of others around the world, in particular those of Muslims. Israel's excavation work around and beneath the holy Al-Aqsa mosque and its wilful destruction of religious, cultural and heritage sites in Al-Quds constitute direct aggression upon the holy Al-Aqsa mosque. Malaysia condemns Israel for its action in that regard. We denounce that blatant act of provocation and the complete disregard shown for the sanctity of the holy mosque. That act will ignite the feelings of Muslims all over the world, and is in fact a step backward in the efforts to achieve peace in the region.

Those acts by Israel against religious, cultural and heritage sites in the occupied territories are direct violations of international law. Malaysia demands an immediate stop to the excavation work being carried out by Israel that has had direct impact on the Al-Aqsa

mosque. We urge the Security Council to demand that Israel immediately seize those illegal activities. We call upon the international community to intervene immediately in order to stop those illegal actions by Israelis.

Israel, as a Member of the United Nations, must respect international laws, conventions and United Nations resolutions, which gave birth to Israel itself. Israel must be held responsible for all breaches committed under the norms of international practice and international law. It cannot continue to do whatever it pleases with impunity and in total disregard of the demands of the international community. Israel must cease its practice of extrajudicial killings, excessive use of force and other destructive practices, such as destroying civilian infrastructure, homes and means of economic livelihood. Such measures violate its obligation as an occupying Power to protect the civilian population.

The United Nations, and in particular the Security Council, must act to ensure that Israel respects and abides by its responsibilities as an occupying Power and as a Member of the United Nations. Continued Security Council inaction and paralysis in the face of Israeli actions will be interpreted as promoting double standards in terms of international practice.

Palestinian statehood remains the apex of the aspirations of the Palestinian people. Israel and its allies must understand that without resolving the Palestinian question, lasting peace cannot not be achieved in the region or beyond it. The Quartet peace process must be put back on track. Israel must agree to return to the peace process and to the implementation of the Quartet Road Map. All parties must have the resolve and political will to provide justice for the Palestinian people. The agreement reached among Palestinians in the holy city of Mecca to form a unity government in Palestine is a positive development in the process of comprehensive engagement among all parties to find long-lasting peace in the Middle East. We commend the Palestinians in that regard, as well as Saudi Arabia for facilitating the agreement.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Mr. Danesh-Yazdi (Islamic Republic of Iran): I wish to begin by congratulating you, Sir, on your assumption of the presidency of the Council this month, as well as by thanking you for having convened

this open debate to discuss the situation in the Middle East, especially the most recent expansionist policies and practices of the Israeli regime in Al-Quds Al-Sharif. Nor should I fail to express our appreciation to the Russian Federation for its able and effective presidency of the Council in the month of January. Our thanks also go to Mr. De Soto for his comprehensive briefing today.

We would like to express our delight and satisfaction over the recent agreement reached between our Palestinian brothers to form a national unity government. We congratulate them on that important achievement. That is a welcome step towards strengthening and enhancing solidarity among Palestinians at this crucial juncture.

My delegation would also like to join other speakers in strongly condemning today's heinous terrorist acts in Lebanon. We express our condolences to the families of the victims and to the people and the Government of Lebanon.

The recent atrocious acts by the Israeli regime and its insolent expansionist policy vis-à-vis the holy Al-Aqsa mosque have once again heightened the concerns of the international community over Israel's unlawful activities, and has consequently exacerbated the already dire situation in the volatile Middle East region. Israel's recent heinous action against the blessed Al-Aqsa mosque and the holy city of Al-Quds Al-Sharif, and its demolition of a historic road connecting Bab Al-Maghriba with the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound, as well as two rooms adjacent to the Al-Buraq wall, have yet again put on display the aggressive and racist nature of that regime.

Moreover, Israel's continued excavation work beneath the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound is indeed a provocative and insulting measure that undermines the sanctity and foundations of the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound and threatens it with collapse. We, along with the other members of the international community, strongly condemn that shocking act. Equally provocative and condemnable is Israel's continued policy of denying Palestinian worshippers access to their religious sites, and its intention to construct a tourist site below the holy Al-Aqsa compound.

As pointed out by the representatives of Cuba and Azerbaijan, speaking on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organization of the Islamic

Conference, respectively, since 1968 the Security Council has adopted no fewer than 16 resolutions that have repeatedly declared the measures and arrangements taken by Israel aimed at changing the legal status, demographic composition and character of the city of Al-Quds Al-Sharif null and void and without any legal validity. Nevertheless, the Israeli regime's defiance of all those calls by the Council and the international community has continued unabated. Indeed, this latest illegal Israeli act is a nefarious attempt to colonize and Judaize Al-Quds Al-Sharif.

Undoubtedly, such deplorable policies and practices are in line with other Israeli war crimes and atrocities, such as extrajudicial killings, targeted assassinations, the wanton destruction of homes, infrastructure and agricultural lands, the detention and imprisonment of thousands of Palestinians, the construction of the expansionist wall and the imposition of collective punishment on the entire Palestinian population. There is an absolute need for the international community to decidedly weigh in and to prevent Israel from carrying out its dangerous designs against Palestinians and against the holy Al-Aqsa mosque compound, which will further jeopardize peace and security in the whole region. The Council has an immense responsibility to shoulder in fulfilling its Charter-based mandate by preventing Israel from continuing to flout the will of the international community incorporated in numerous United Nations resolutions.

It is unfortunate that a single delegation, exploiting its permanent presence on the Council and its privilege of the veto, has always prevented the Council from pronouncing itself, let alone taking any meaningful action, on numerous Israeli crimes in Palestine and elsewhere in the region. We hope that all members of the Council recognize the need to take decisive action in the face of the new Israeli crimes in the region, and that they will not choose to allow a further erosion of the Council's authority as a result of a failure to address the grave situation created in the wake of recent Israeli expansionist policies and actions. There should be no doubt that those who impede justice and accountability for Israeli war crimes by repeatedly abusing the power of the veto bear responsibility for the bloodshed that we witness in the occupied Palestinian territories time and again.

Throughout the period under review, and while the Israeli war machine has been relentlessly at work to

shatter the lives and livelihoods of Palestinians, the Israeli regime has persisted with its aggressive policy towards Lebanon, as well as towards others in the region. It has continued to occupy the Syrian Golan Heights and parts of Lebanese territory. That regime is adamantly violating Security Council resolution 1701 (2006), including by violating Lebanese airspace. Israel's violation of Lebanese territory in the area of Maroun Al-Ras last week was a flagrant breach of resolution 1701 (2006) and a showcase example of Israeli contempt for the Council and its decisions.

The tragedy of Palestine, as a major source of anger and frustration that is felt throughout the Islamic world, lies at the heart of the Middle East conflict. The criminal Israeli acts against the Palestinians and other peoples in the region constitute the gravest threat currently posed to regional and international peace and security. It is evident that durable peace in Palestine and throughout the Middle East will be possible only with justice, an end to discrimination, an end to the occupation of Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese territory, the return of all Palestinian refugees and a democratic mechanism through which all the inhabitants of Palestine, as well as Palestinians driven from their homeland, will have the opportunity to determine their future in a democratic and peaceful fashion. If history is any guide, peace in the Middle East cannot be achieved through State terrorism, occupation, intimidation and aggression.

Before concluding, I would like to place it on record that my delegation rejects the baseless allegations raised against my country in the Council today by the representatives of Israel and the United States. This is yet another tired practice of the Israeli regime and its advocate, intended to divert the attention of the international community from Israeli crimes in Palestine and elsewhere in the region, by raising unfounded allegations against others.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Norway.

Mrs. Juul (Norway): Norway welcomes the agreement reached in Mecca on the formation of a Palestinian unity government. We commend President Abbas for his tireless efforts to establish a broad national unity government on a political platform that reflects the Quartet principles of non-violence, recognition of Israel and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations.

Norway would also like to acknowledge the particularly important role that Saudi Arabia — together with Egypt, Jordan, Syria and the League of Arab States — have played in making this possible. This shows that concerned countries are taking responsibility for dealing with the major political challenges in their own region.

The Mecca agreement is an important step forward. The formation of a unity government will give President Abbas a broad basis for conducting negotiations with Israel. It is essential that the international community continue to build on what has been achieved. We firmly believe that this positive development needs international encouragement.

Norway welcomes the recent statements by the Quartet, in which it promises to remain closely engaged in the renewed political dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian leaders, and to monitor developments and actions taken by the parties.

Norway would also like to express its full support for the upcoming tripartite meeting between President Abbas, Prime Minister Olmert and Secretary of State Rice. We hope that it will encourage the resumption of a peace process leading to a two-State solution, with Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace, within secure and recognized borders.

To underpin the political process, the two parties should make every effort to build confidence. Norway urges the parties to implement fully what was agreed upon at the 23 December meeting between the Israeli and Palestinian leaders and to meet their obligations under the Agreement on Movement and Access, the Sharm el-Sheikh understanding of 2005 and the Road Map.

The Mecca agreement should also be an important step towards ending internal violence among the Palestinians and creating stability in the Palestinian territory. We expect the new government to reinstate the rule of law in Gaza and to act decisively against terrorism and rocket attacks on Israel.

Norway also urges the immediate release of the captured Israeli soldier and the detained members of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

Norway has for many years actively promoted a two-State solution by supporting Palestinian institution-building. This is crucial in building a viable,

democratic and independent Palestinian State that can live in peace with Israel.

We welcome the Mecca agreement. It is now our hope that the agreement can make it possible to normalize relations between a Palestinian unity government and the international community.

Let me also, on behalf of my Government, condemn today's terrorist attack in Lebanon and extend our condolences to the Government and the people of Lebanon.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

Mr. Arias Cárdenas (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) (*spoke in Spanish*): The delegation of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela congratulates the delegation of the Slovak Republic on its assumption of the presidency of the Security Council for the month of February and on having convened this important debate on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. Our congratulations go also to the delegation of the Russian Federation on the excellent manner in which it presided over the work of the Council in January 2007. We thank Mr. Alvaro de Soto, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, for his briefing this morning.

My delegation aligns itself with the statement made by the representative of Cuba on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement.

We are convinced that the maintenance of international peace and security is founded on the premise that relations between States — regardless of their ideological, cultural or political differences — should be guided by strict commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and by respect for international law, including the principle of peaceful coexistence between States. Our country has historically worked to promote a permanent solution to the Palestinian question in order to achieve stable and lasting peace in the Middle East. In that context, we have supported all agreements between the parties in the search for a peaceful negotiated solution. Hence, we consider it indispensable that the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people be fully realized.

The Government of Israel has continued to move civilians into settlements that had previously been

vacated, in clear violation of the Road Map. This has led to a 6-per-cent increase in the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank, as Mr. Ibrahim Gambari, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, told the Council on 25 January (see S/PV.5624).

Peace in the region will be achieved only with full implementation of the relevant resolutions of the Security Council, the Arab Peace Initiative, the principle of land for peace and the Road Map. My Government considers it crucial to establish an independent Palestinian State that will respond to the Palestinian people's aspirations to freedom, independence and security.

The Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela reaffirms its firm support for the legitimate and democratically elected Government in Beirut and for the territorial integrity, unity and political independence of Lebanon. It fully supports the reconstruction of Lebanon and reaffirms its condemnation of actions taken against that country. Here, we consider that complete implementation of resolution 1701 (2006) is essential.

The abuse of the veto by the United States with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has served as a cloak for major human rights violations which have been vigorously condemned by the United Nations, and in particular by the Human Rights Council. The violence in Iraq clearly shows the consequences of unilateral action taken in violation of international law, such as the United States invasion of Iraq.

The situation in the Middle East region constitutes one of the greatest moral debts owed by the international community, and especially by the United Nations and the Security Council. The Organization was born with a mandate to maintain international peace and security and to ensure compliance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the norms of coexistence and unwavering respect for international law. The international community expects the Security Council and the Organization as a whole to act with that historical perspective.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Argentina.

Mr. Mayoral (Argentina) (*spoke in Spanish*): First of all, Mr. President, we would like to thank you and your delegation for organizing this open debate and to congratulate you on the way in which you are

leading the Security Council's debates during the month of February. We would also like to welcome Mr. Alvaro de Soto, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority.

As we all know, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is at the core of the Middle East peace process today. That is why, now more than ever before, we must attach priority to this subject before it is too late. Over the past few years, the Quartet, through the Road Map has been leading this process, defining what the final objective of the peace process should be and what road the parties should take to reach it. In spite of the efforts made since 2002, the objective of two States living side by side in peace and security continues to be as elusive as before.

The process has stalled in its first phase. We believe that if the Quartet does not involve itself more actively in the evaluation and the implementation of the revised Road Map and does not play a more proactive role in the peace process, it will become a dispensable mechanism, and the United Nations will have failed once more in the Middle East peace process.

However, we would like to stress that the parties directly involved bear the main responsibility for the stalemate in the peace process. They cannot blame the United Nations. It is the responsibility of the Palestinian Authority to maintain peace and order in Gaza, to prevent rocket attacks against Israel, immediately free the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, reform their institutions, eradicate corruption and combat extremism.

Although we support the recent agreement between President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas leader Khaled Mashal to create a unity government — and we wish them success in its administration — we believe that their authorities must recognize the right of Israel to exist, accept previous agreements signed by the Palestinian Authority and renounce violence.

As for the Israelis, the practices of expansion of settlements, the construction of the separation wall on the West Bank, the policy of closures and restriction of movement, extrajudicial assassinations, excessive use of force and arbitrary arrest of Palestinian officials and legislators do not contribute to generating hope in the Palestinian population for the future. As a consequence

of such practices, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza has deepened, worsening the precarious living conditions of the Palestinian population.

Argentina would like to reiterate that the only path is that of peace negotiations on the basis of Security Council resolutions, the Madrid terms of reference and the principle of land for peace. The international community, and especially the Quartet and the Security Council, must assume a more active role in helping the parties resume negotiations and put an end to the vicious circle of death and retaliation that has beset the Middle East. In this regard, we welcome the next conference, planned for later in February.

With regard to Lebanon, we would like first of all to condemn today's attacks north of Beirut and to express our condolences to the families of the victims.

With regard to the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006), we cannot but express our concern at the recent violence along the Blue Line between Lebanon and Israel. Both the detonation of explosives along the Blue Line by the Israel Defense Force at the beginning of February — explosives suspected to have been recently placed there by Hizbollah — and the exchange of fire between the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Israel Defense Force on 8 February in the vicinity of Maroun al-Ras demonstrate the fragility of peace in that country. We repeat that the arms embargo established in resolution 1701 (2006) must be respected not only by the parties but also by all States, be they neighbours or not. We also consider it essential that the two Israeli soldiers captured by Hizbollah in July 2006 be freed.

Finally, we believe that another fundamental ingredient in the search for peace is the end of the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights and the return of that territory to Syria in accordance with resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), as well as through Syria's adoption of policies that demonstrate its commitment to peace and stability in the region.

Although this debate has historically focused on trying to give momentum to the peace process between Palestinians, Lebanese, Syrians and Israelis, the gloomy prospects for the Middle East as a whole as well as for neighbouring and nearby countries such as Iraq and Iran mean that the Arab-Israeli conflict now has an additional dimension that facilitates, unfortunately, international terrorist activity, for

example that of Al-Qaida, and endangers peace in all countries of the region.

We believe that all these conflicts are interrelated and reinforce each other. That is why we call for greater Security Council activity and courage on the part of all parties involved to sit down at the negotiating table, bearing in mind that only a just peace that reflects all the interests of all the parties will be sustainable in the future. That should be objective of the Security Council and of our Organization.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Morocco.

Mr. Chabar (Morocco) (*spoke in Arabic*): Allow me at the outset, Sir, to extend to you and your friendly country, Slovakia, our sincere congratulations on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council for this month. We wish you every success in your work. Nor must I fail to pay tribute to your predecessor, the representative of the Russian Federation, for the wisdom with which he conducted the work of the Council last month.

Permit me also to extend our thanks to Mr. Alvaro de Soto for his briefing today. The briefing showed that this meeting of the Security Council to discuss the situation in the Middle East is taking place in very delicate and sensitive conditions that raise both hope and concern: hope in the wake of the Mecca agreement between the Palestinian parties and the continuation of international efforts to revitalize the peace process and direct negotiations between the parties; and concern because of the explosions in brotherly Lebanon this morning, in addition to the continued tense situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, particularly Al-Quds Al-Sharif, which is due to the continuation by the occupying Power of its policy of provocation and daily humiliation of the Palestinians.

In this context, Morocco associates itself with those that have condemned Israeli intransigence. In that regard, we particularly support the statements made on behalf of the Group of Arab States, the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement. Those statements clearly expressed the Kingdom of Morocco's concerns with regard to the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories.

I will address only certain points, in view of the fact that the Kingdom of Morocco, in the person of His

Majesty King Mohammed VI, is currently presiding over the Al-Quds Committee of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and given the gravity and the consequences of the situation in Al-Quds Al-Sharif.

It is no secret that what the Israeli authorities in occupied East Jerusalem are calling renovation work in the vicinity of the Al-Aqsa mosque has led to the collapse of the Al-Maghariba gate and two rooms adjacent to the Al-Boraq wall, which are extremely important religious and historic sites. Nothing can justify such actions, which constitute further violations and aggression against the sanctity of the Al-Aqsa mosque and threaten it with collapse, and they provoke Muslim sentiments. These actions contravene international laws and norms and constitute a direct violation of Security Council resolutions.

His Majesty King Mohammed VI, Chairman of the Al-Quds Committee, immediately condemned the work being carried out in the vicinity of the Al-Aqsa mosque — work aimed at changing the demographic character of the site, which is a symbol of Islamic culture. He reiterated that Israel must abide by United Nations resolutions concerning Jerusalem and reaffirmed the legal imperative of preserving its religious, cultural, geographic and demographic character. The Chairman of the Al-Quds Committee also called upon Israel to immediately halt these activities and instead to focus on peace negotiations and mutual respect.

These illegitimate Israeli practices, which pose a grave threat to the region, should be addressed by the Security Council, which bears primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. The Council should urge the Israeli Government to put an immediate end to these violations and to comply with all relevant international resolutions.

The Kingdom of Morocco believes that the time has come for the Security Council to shoulder its responsibilities, just as Palestinian and Arab efforts have been made at Mecca to prevent the situation from deteriorating further. My delegation believes that a just and equitable peace must be based on the security and stability of the region and that the path of peaceful negotiations is the only basis for international legitimacy. That path will free the Middle East from the vicious circle of violence and counter-violence.

Accordingly, we believe that every effort should be made to that end. All the parties must return to the

negotiating table as the only means of establishing a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East, leading to Israeli withdrawal from all occupied Arab and Palestinian territories and to the establishment of an independent Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital. As ever, Morocco stands ready to contribute to any effort to escape this vicious circle, which would enable the peoples and the countries of the region to live in peace and security.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Pakistan.

Mr. Amil (Pakistan): Allow me at the outset to congratulate you, Sir, on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council for this month. Permit me also to congratulate Ambassador Churkin of the Russian Federation on a successful Council presidency during the month of January.

We thank you, Mr. President, for convening this meeting on this important issue at this crucial and delicate time. Since the Council last convened a public meeting on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, notable developments have taken place in the region, which has long been used to living in hope and despair, side by side.

While there was hope in the respite from violence brought about by the ceasefire in Gaza, that proved to be short-lived when, yet again, the region was thrown into despair by Israeli actions in and around the Haram Al-Sharif compound. We fully support the statements made on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

Although media reports claim that the controversial construction work near the Al-Aqsa masjid is to be put off to allow public consultations, preparatory excavations still continue, much to the anguish of Muslims the world over. Those actions are illegal, they play with the emotions of the Muslim world and they threaten peace and security in the region.

The Al-Aqsa masjid is the third-holiest place for Muslims: the site of the ascension of the Prophet Mohammed. We are distressed that the historic road connecting the Bab al-Maghariba with the Al-Aqsa compound has already been demolished, in addition to two rooms adjacent to the Al-Buraq wall. The excavation work undermines the foundations of Al-Aqsa and could threaten it with collapse.

Since 1968, the Security Council has adopted 16 resolutions — in particular resolution 465 (1980) — which have repeatedly declared that measures and arrangements undertaken by Israel with the aim of changing the legal status, demographic composition and character of the holy city of Jerusalem — Al-Quds Al-Sharif — are null and void and without any legal validity whatsoever. These acts undermine the efforts that the international community is undertaking to resume the peace process. They also prejudice the final-status negotiations by creating new realities on the ground.

We call on the Security Council to fulfil its responsibilities and to take urgent action to end the Israeli violations against the Al-Aqsa masjid. We call on Israel to respect the Council's resolutions and international law, particularly international humanitarian law. We strongly urge the Israeli side to halt all work at the site and to take all precautions necessary for the preservation of the holy places.

While these Israeli actions pose new obstacles to peace, the Muslim world has been engaged in sincere endeavours to promote peace in Palestine and throughout the Middle East through the active intercession of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Fatah and Hamas have reached an agreement in Mecca to form a national unity government. The Security Council and the Quartet should welcome that development. A Palestinian unity government willing to negotiate peace with Israel is a positive development. It should lead to an end to the economic boycott of the Palestinian Government. It should also lead to concerted efforts to ensure the stability of the Palestinian Authority and to enhance its capacity to preserve peace and promote development.

The Israeli-Palestine issue is at the heart of the multiple challenges confronting the Middle East. A comprehensive, just and lasting solution based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003), the principle of land for peace, the Arab Peace Initiative and the Quartet's Road Map is urgently needed.

In the context of the increasing and multiple threats to peace and security in the Middle East, President Musharraf recently visited several Islamic countries to consult their leaders on ways and means to address and overcome the threats arising from the Palestinian problem, the Israeli-Syrian difficulties over

the Golan and the phenomenon of violent resistance to the injustices suffered by the Muslim world. A core group of Muslim countries has been constituted to develop a comprehensive approach to the multiple crises besieging the Middle East, including by providing fresh impetus to resolve the long-standing Arab-Israeli conflict. The President of Pakistan has explained that new initiative to the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran, Malaysia, Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates, and it has found general support and understanding. We hope that a group of leading Muslim countries will soon meet at a high level to bring their collective weight to bear in favour of a just and fair solution to the Palestinian question and other problems afflicting the Middle East. The Security Council should actively support those efforts.

The President: I now call on the representative of Bangladesh.

Mr. Sorcar (Bangladesh): Let me begin by thanking you, Mr. President, for the timely convening of this meeting against the backdrop of the recent developments in the Middle East. We fully align ourselves with the statements made by the Chairs of the Non-Aligned Movement, the Arab Group and the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

We would like to reaffirm that the question of Palestine lies at the heart of the Middle East crisis and that the occupation must be recognized as central to the issue of Palestine. Lasting peace cannot be achieved unless the root causes are addressed. We reiterate our full support for the legitimate cause of the Palestinian people and for its inalienable right to a sovereign and independent State, with East Jerusalem as its capital, existing alongside Israel in peace and security.

We maintain that for a just and sustainable peace to take root, Israel must meet all its obligations under the Fourth Geneva Convention, relevant General Assembly and Security Council resolutions and other peace initiatives, including the Road Map.

We are pleased to note the recent conclusion in Mecca of the agreement between Hamas and Fatah. We hope that this will resolve the difficulty within the Palestinian administration, create an enabling environment for peace through the formation of a national unity government and lead to the lifting of the siege currently imposed on the Palestinian Government. We also look forward to the upcoming tripartite meeting to be held on 19 February, between

the United States Secretary of State, the Israeli Prime Minister and the Palestinian President and to a positive outcome, and we hope that this will revive the stalled peace process.

The Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem is one of the holiest places for Muslims. It is the mosque towards which all Muslims turned for daily prayer before they turned to Mecca. Due to the extreme political sensitivity of this area, very little archaeological excavation has been done until now. We do not see any reason why this should suddenly change. When there are major political issues pending, it would be imprudent to continue with this plan, as it is in no way helpful to the peace process. Digging under the holy site gives the feeling that the shrine above is under threat. This is neither the time nor the place to look for ancient artefacts.

The building of the bridge that is planned here is widely suspected to have strategic intent. The controversial construction and the excavation work should immediately stop. The Security Council has a responsibility to halt the ongoing work as it could affect and further destabilize the already imperilled peace effort.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Senegal.

Mr. Badji (Senegal) (*spoke in French*): First of all, Sir, I should like to congratulate on you on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council and to pay a well-deserved tribute to the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation for his outstanding presidency last month. I should also like to warmly thank Mr. Alvaro de Soto, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority. This important debate on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, enables us to keep constantly under careful review the issue of stability in the Middle East, which is a crucial item on the international peace and security agenda.

My delegation wishes to draw attention to recent developments in the situation in occupied Palestinian territory, which are cause for renewed concern regarding the chances for a resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. It is a matter of regret that every time we have some hope for the establishment of conditions for peace in the region, various acts are

committed that once again undermine what has been achieved as a result of long years of effort and compromise, as well as the desire of the protagonists on both sides to commit themselves resolutely to the path of peaceful coexistence between the Palestinian and Israeli peoples.

Indeed, the climate of relative calm which recently reigned between Israelis and Palestinians has just suffered yet another blow following a decision taken by the Israeli authorities to begin on Tuesday, 6 February 2007, an archaeological dig at the foot of the mosque compound in Jerusalem, in addition to the construction work for a new bridge leading to the Al-Maghariba gate. The implementation of this project for a bridge by the Israeli occupation authorities is paralleled by drastic measures restricting the freedoms of Palestinians, especially the prohibition against entry by anyone younger than 45 years of age into the area of the Al-Aqsa mosque. This is a flagrant violation of the right of this people to have access to its religious sites.

This Israeli initiative is likely to increase the climate of tension and violence in the region and could also revive the anger and bitterness of the Islamic umma, which would have consequences for the overall process for a settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict. This is especially true since the Al-Aqsa mosque represents the third holiest place for Islam after Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. In this regard, Senegal emphasizes the need to conserve the tri-faith nature of the holy city of Jerusalem and calls upon Israel to urgently halt its policy of the systematic destruction of the symbols of Islam in that city.

In the same vein, my delegation is of the view that none of the parties can gain from committing acts which could have the effect of compromising peaceful coexistence between the Arab and Jewish peoples and the stability of the Middle East region as a whole.

My delegation welcomes the inter-Palestinian agreements achieved in Mecca on 9 February 2007 between Fatah and Hamas on the formation of a government of national unity in Palestine. These agreements should bring about reconciliation among Palestinian leaders with a view to resuming negotiations with the Israeli authorities. With this in view, we call upon the international community, and more particularly the Quartet, to help in this process with a view towards a rapid return to the negotiation

table and the implementation of the relevant peace plans.

For its part, the United Nations, and more specifically the Security Council, should continue to urge all the parties to respect and strictly implement its resolutions and international law. Senegal places a great deal of hope in the activities of the new Secretary-General, who, thanks to his qualities as a seasoned diplomat, in which he resembles his predecessor, could play a decisive role to that end.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Jordan.

Mr. Zoubi (Jordan) (spoke in Arabic): Allow me at the outset, Sir, to congratulate you on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council for this month. I wish also, through you, to express our thanks to your predecessor, the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation, for his leadership last month. I should also like to express our appreciation to Mr. Alvaro de Soto, Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, and to thank him for his briefing to the Security Council this morning.

My delegation would also like to align itself with the statements made by the Permanent Representative of Kuwait on behalf of the Group of Arab States and by the Permanent Representative of Azerbaijan on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in the context of the Council's consideration of the item entitled "The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question".

The question of Palestine remains the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The situation in the Middle East is directly affected by any progress or backward movement on the question of Palestine. Jordan welcomes the agreement reached in the holy city of Mecca between Fatah and Hamas as an important step towards the creation of a government of national unity. It will bolster practical, serious efforts to reach a just, peaceful and fair settlement in accordance with the terms of reference of the peace process, the relevant international resolutions, the Arab Peace Initiative and the fundamental principles of the Road Map.

While the Palestinian parties were consulting and reaching agreement in the holy city of Mecca, Israel initiated excavation and demolition work on the historic road leading to the Al-Bab Al-Maghriba,

abutting Al-Haram Al-Sharif. That represents a serious escalation that jeopardizes Islamic holy sites in the city of Al-Quds. It is unacceptable under any pretext and is likely to trigger emotional responses and lead to grave consequences.

The Hashemite leadership has given the utmost attention to the issue of rebuilding and restoring Islamic holy sites in Al-Quds al-Sharif. The Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa mosque were restored in 1952 and again following the fire at Al-Aqsa in early 1969.

Earlier this month, Jordan completed the rebuilding of the Salahaddin shrine and has returned it to the Al-Aqsa mosque, having thus repaired the damage done to the shrine by the 1969 fire. The Jordanian Government has strongly condemned Israel's violations of the sanctity of the holy Al-Aqsa mosque, beginning with excavation work and followed by the use of force against worshippers in the compound.

The desecration of any holy site or symbol is of the utmost seriousness, and the continued excavation by Israel of Islamic holy sites can lead only to a further escalation of violence, which certainly will not help efforts to reactivate the peace process and return to direct negotiations.

The Bab Al-Maghriba area, where Israel is undertaking its excavations, is part and parcel of Al-Haram al-Sharif, as it is one of the main entryways to the site. It is an Islamic site and must not be desecrated. Its maintenance and restoration are the responsibility of the religious authorities, not of the Israeli Government.

Furthermore, Al-Haram al-Sharif, including the Bab Al-Maghriba area, is inside the city of Al-Quds — Jerusalem — to which the relevant Security Council resolutions apply. The Israeli Government knows full well that Israel has no sovereignty over Al-Quds. No Security Council resolution recognizes Israeli sovereignty over Al-Quds. These latest Israeli practices are a clear violation of those resolutions and represent an attempt to change the legal status of the city of Al-Quds, an occupied city to which the Fourth Geneva Conventions of 1949 apply, just as they do to all territory occupied by Israel since 1967, including the city of Al-Quds.

All of those Israeli actions are a clear violation of the legal opinion of the International Court of Justice

on the construction of the wall, which called for Israel to refrain from any attempt to change the demographic or geographic status of Al-Quds and the Palestinian territory.

The Government of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan calls on the Israeli Government immediately to cease its illegal violations. We call on the Security Council to move quickly and to make every effort and use its good offices to put an end to illegal Israeli practices such as excavation work and its attempts to destroy Islamic sites in Al-Quds. We warn of the grave consequences of this escalation, which strikes at the heart of all the efforts made by the international community, including the Quartet, to achieve a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East.

Reactions to Israel's excavation and demolition work were not limited to the Arab world or the Islamic world. Indeed, the parties that ordered such work have now realized the widespread condemnation to which it has led, even inside Israel, and perhaps they now realize how unwise their decision was.

The President: The next speaker inscribed on my list is the Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, to whom I give the floor.

Mr. Badji (Senegal) (*spoke in French*): Mr. President, may I at the outset congratulate you on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council for the month of February. I am certain that, under your enlightened guidance, the work of the Council will be carried out in a constructive spirit and with all due efficiency. I should like also to avail myself of this opportunity to commend your predecessor, the Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation, for the exemplary manner in which he led the work of the Council during the month of January.

I am grateful to you, Sir, as well as to the other members of the Council, for having given me the opportunity to participate, in my capacity as Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, in this important debate on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

We are gathered here today in the Council to provide a response to the disturbing events that continue to take place in the occupied Palestinian

territories, including East Jerusalem. The Committee remains extremely concerned at the situation in the territory, which is a dangerous one in terms of security and disastrous in humanitarian terms. That situation is the direct result of the Israeli occupation. The stringent restrictions imposed on freedom of movement within the territory, as well as border closings, seriously hinder the delivery of humanitarian assistance as well as economic recovery and development. Frustration is increasing, which in turn fuels extremism.

At this sensitive juncture, it is truly extraordinary that the Israeli Government should have authorized excavation and repair work on a site that includes the Al-Aqsa mosque. As the Council is aware, there is great tension between the peoples who live in Jerusalem because of what the city represents to various religions. The excavation work done several years ago in the area of the Al-Aqsa mosque had already violated the sanctity of the third holiest site in Islam and given rise to indignation throughout the Muslim world.

The Security Council has consistently reaffirmed the fact that the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 applies to all territories occupied by Israel since 1967, including East Jerusalem, and has repeatedly called on Israel to comply with the provisions of that Convention. It has stated in several resolutions that all steps taken by Israel to modify the status of Jerusalem are null and void, and it has asked Israel to rescind such measures and to refrain from any actions that might alter the status of Jerusalem. The excavation and the work under way today not only undermine the foundations of the mosque compound; they also alter the character of the city, thereby triggering a dangerous resurgence of tension in the Middle East that could doom to failure any peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

We are encouraged by the agreement recently concluded in Mecca between the leaders of Fatah and Hamas. We welcome that initiative and the assistance given by the regional parties, especially the Governments of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. We look forward to the formation of a new government of national unity — one that is determined to shoulder its responsibility for the maintenance of order and to put an end to the violence in the territory under its authority. That will mean putting an end to the firing of rockets against Israel and to all other attacks targeting innocent civilians. We hope that the formation of a

government of national unity will enable the international community to lift the financial restrictions, which are preventing well-disposed Governments, organizations and individuals that wish to release their financial aid.

The Committee welcomed the November ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. The ceasefire must now be extended to the West Bank, and it must be reinforced by specific political measures to enable the parties to engage in real political dialogue. The international community should create a credible and effective third-party monitoring mechanism in order to help to maintain the truce.

We appeal to Israel, the occupying Power, to immediately end its military operations and its use of excessive force so that its actions comply with the Fourth Geneva Convention. We appeal to both parties to immediately put an end to all acts of violence, to show the greatest restraint and to foster a return to calm. The Committee believes that the Security Council must live up to its responsibilities and help to put an end to the violence and the dire poverty in the occupied Palestinian territories.

For its part, the Committee will continue to work with the legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people, first and foremost the President of the Palestinian Authority. The Committee hopes that a new

government of national unity will endeavour to restore unity among Palestinians and that it will be able to take the courageous steps necessary to improve their living conditions.

The Committee furthermore believes that peace can be achieved only through a negotiated settlement to the conflict — one that would lead to the birth of a viable Palestinian State on the basis of the pre-1967 borders. The resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be based on the Madrid terms of reference, the principle of land for peace, resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003) and the Arab Peace Initiative, including the acceptance of Israel as a neighbour, living in peace and security within the framework of a comprehensive settlement.

The President: I thank Mr. Badji for his statement.

There are no further speakers inscribed on my list. The Security Council has thus concluded the present stage of its consideration of the item on its agenda.

In accordance with the understanding reached in prior consultations, I invite Council members to consultations following the adjournment of this meeting.

The meeting rose at 4.45 p.m.